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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003029

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AGENDA: HIGHLIGHTS

REF: SEOUL 2917

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) As the National Assembly convenes its 262nd session, beginning September 1 and lasting a hundred days, politicians and pundits alike anticipate a series of political battles as the ruling and opposition parties struggle to gain the upper hand. Given the stunning defeat for the ruling Uri party in the May 31 local elections and a continuing downward spiral of public opinion toward President Roh Moo-hyun, the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) smelling blood, is geared up to further discredit the Uri Party. The outcome of the political battles in the legislature is especially crucial because all are closely monitoring intra-party movements for the presidential elections, to be held December ¶2007. END SUMMARY.

SCHEDULE

¶2. (SBU) On September 8, the confirmation of presidential appointees begins and the seventeen standing committees convene to discuss and vote on issues under their respective jurisdictions. The most important task for the Assembly, the audit and inspection of the past year's administrative activities and budget, is slated to begin on October 11, which is immediately after the nation's biggest holiday, Chuseok, or Thanksgiving. The inspection period will continue throughout the month of October. On November 1, the Roh government will give an administrative policy speech concerning the 2007 draft budget, followed by speeches from the chairmen of the negotiating committees in the next few days. The session will conclude December 9.

NATIONAL BUDGET

¶3. (C) The ruling party had initially proposed conducting the audit of the past year's activities before the October holiday season, but gave in to the GNP and minor opposition parties' demand that it be held after the holidays. The delay is a victory for the GNP which essentially bought more time to harass the ruling party on other contentious issues such as the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) and the "Sea Story" gambling scandal. (See Ref.) First-term

GNP lawmaker Jin Young told poloffs on August 22 that the gambling scandal is likely to be an issue during the audit process. Although President Roh apologized to the Korean public about the scandal on August 31, the ongoing criminal investigation into the involvement of lobbyists, businessmen, and politicians, indicates that the issue will not fade from the political scene in the near future.

¶4. (C) According to Park Sung-min, Director of Min Consulting, a bipartisan political consulting firm, the traditional order of the agenda has been 1) the audit of state administration, 2) deliberation on legislation, 3) budget for the upcoming year. Thus, the delay of the audit raises the question of what will be done during September. The opposition has suggested tackling legislation earlier rather than later, but Park speculates that the ruling party will try to delay deliberating on legislative bills to avoid gridlock.

CONFIRMATION OF PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTEES

¶5. (C) The National Assembly has the constitutional mandate to remove a cabinet member from office at any time and to confirm appointees, albeit in a pro-forma way. In theory, the Assembly must open a confirmation hearing within twenty days of receiving the request for confirmation. On August 16, President Roh nominated Chon Hyo-suk to head the Constitutional Court, a nomination that triggered strong protests from the conservative camp. Chon has been criticized for her unwavering support for Roh during the 2004 impeachment and for a controversial measure to relocate the capital. Her confirmation will likely be hotly contested. If confirmed, Chon will become the first female Chief Justice of the nation's highest court. The President also nominated Vice Justice Minister Kim Hee-ok, another progressive and Roh supporter, to replace one of the eight justices of the court.

OLD LAWS, NEW LAWS

¶6. (C) Forty-one laws were passed during the extraordinary session held from August 22-29, including a local real estate tax cut and a law legalizing the confiscation of property belonging to the heirs of Japanese collaborators. Media pundits predict that many of the proposed bills not deliberated upon during the extraordinary session will be carried over into the regular session.

¶7. (C) The ever-controversial private school law, enacted in 1963 and revised more than 30 times, may be brought before the Assembly to be revised yet again. Uri lawmaker and Defense Committee member, Yoo Jay-kun told Donga Ilbo on August 31, "There is a movement within the party to reform the private school law aimed at targeting corruption." Yoo further stated that the issue at hand was whether the Uri would have to concede on the private school law in order to get concessions from the GNP for their support of the public welfare bill. Other controversial laws include regulation of campaign finance and ballot counting, a labor-reform law targeted at non-regular workers, and a possible law regarding the development of Yongsan base once USFK relocates to Pyeongtaek. The Seoul Metropolitan Government, headed by GNP Mayor Oh Se-hoon, and the Ministry of Construction and Transportation are currently engaged in a tug-of-war over how the Yongsan land should be developed and who would finance such development.

OPCON DEBATE

¶8. (C) The transfer of wartime operational control is a sensitive issue in South Korean society and politics. GNP lawmakers, along with former defense chiefs, have repeatedly criticized the planned transfer and have accused President Roh of negligence in protecting the nation's security. The

Assembly's youngest member and representative from Busan, Kim Hee-jung, told poloff on August 25, "for the GNP, the timing of the OPCON transfer is most problematic since the Peninsula's security situation is at its worst since the July 5 missile launchings." However, some pundits interpret the GNP's opposition as ill-timed and misdirected especially when the U.S. and the ROK have already mutually agreed upon the transfer. Political consultant Park Sung-min told poloffs on August 31, "the full complexity of the OPCON issue: the political, economic, military, and historic dimensions, have yet to be fully understood by members of the public."

COMMENT

19. (C) While there are many controversial issues on the horizon for this fall, experts claim that intra-party battles will grow more heated in 2007 as the next presidential election approaches. Uri and GNP politicians both anticipate the completion of the U.S.-ROK Free Trade Agreement negotiations and subsequent vote to flare up late this year and early 2007. In the meantime, the Uri Party aims to minimize the damage to its image and to prevent further scandals from emerging. The GNP has its sights set on boosting its chances of becoming the new ruling party in the next Assembly elections in April 2008. END COMMENT.
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